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ABSTRACT

Scholars of writing, language, and culture will find a rich fund of research material in 19th-century obituaries which convey extensive details of the deceased's life through an elegant language reminiscent of an oral culture. In contrast to today's newspaper obituaries, which are business-like, tight-lipped, and entirely devoid of any details or feelings, the obituaries of the 19th-century are elevated in a poetic style overflowing with drama, emotion, and adventure. Extensive excerpts from these obituaries show how they unashamedly expressed grief and the shock of loss; unlike today, the personal details of the deceased's last moments are not spared. One excerpt, for instance, explains how Miss Mattie Ayers threw herself into the Saranac River at Moffitsville (New York), after outrunning her brother and a friend on her way to a cliff. After her rescue, she "gave a few faint gasps and died." In addition to grisly details, all people, regardless of how saintly or naughty, merited a notice of their unique experiences, important contributions, or personal characteristics. These obituaries also depict a pre-technological society in which 60 was a ripe old age and people much younger died of diseases now regarded as extinct, such as typhoid, scarlet fever, and diphtheria. Remnants of an oral cultural tradition are evident in the use of stock phrases and references to word-of-mouth information. (TB)

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THE ROMANTIC RHETORIC OF 19th CENTURY OBITUARIES: "SHE GAVE A FEW FAINT GASPS AND DIED"

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Individual Presentation at the
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Those of us who have read Fannie Flagg's novel Fried Green Tomatoes remember Evelyn Couch, the depressed, middle-aged protagonist who feared hospitals, doctors, and death. The first thing she did every morning was read the obituaries in the newspaper "even before she read her horoscope" (58).

> [Evelyn] was always pleased when the person who had died had been in their seventies or eighties, and she loved it when the dear departed had been over ninety; it made her feel safe somehow. But when she read that they had died in their forties or fifties, it disturbed her all day, especially if, at the end of the obituary, the family had requested that a donation be sent to the cancer society. But what disturbed her the most was when the cause of death was not listed.
>
> A short illness of what?
>
> Died suddenly of what?...
>
> She wanted all the details in black and white (58-59).

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Evelyn's anguish is understandable. Today's obituaries are short, business-like, tight-lipped and entirely devoid of any details or feelings. The departed of today, portrayed as nothing more than a terse list of clubs and survivors, are stripped of their humanity by our cryptic, cold, and detached style.

However, it was not always this way.

Recently in a late relative's attic, I discovered a scrapbook full of yellowed newspaper clippings. I opened it carefully---for the clippings were very frail and looked as though they might easily disintegrate---and discovered a collection of very old obituaries which had been pasted in by some unknown ancestor. Dates ranging from the mid to the late 1800's had been recorded in the margins in a spindly, old-fashioned handwriting. I began to read. These profiles of dozens of unknown, un-famous, unexceptional people, who had lived and died in the obscurity of nineteenth century upstate New York, were so absorbing and entertaining that I carried the collection downstairs and continued to read them for the next few evenings. These obituaries revealed a rhetoric of death which was entirely different from the one we know now.

Our nineteenth century ancestors knew how to write an obituary!

These obituaries from the past vibrated with passion, detail and....life. Written in an elevated, poetic style, overflowing with drama, emotion, and adventure, these death notices were constructed as meandering, entertaining narratives about people's lives and deaths. They unashamedly expressed grief and shock at the loss, and

unlike today, when the personal details of people's final exits are jealously guarded from the public, they offered graphic details about the late person's medical history, final hours, degree of suffering (which, by the way, was always endured "with Christian fortitude"), and moment of death. If the deceased had died in an accident or had committed suicide, so much the better; the element of adventure could then be added to the tale. In short, these obituaries served the dual purpose of announcing a death and providing bittersweet entertainment.

The following is an excerpt from the obituary of the late Charles Taylor. He had been

> ...in full enjoyment of his usual good health, and on Sunday, the day preceding his death he was out riding with a party of friends, and seemed in an unusual genial and happy frame of mind. He was walking about the streets in the evening and returned home and retired at the usual hour, manifesting no dangerous or distressing symptoms. About twelve o'clock he was attacked with violent spasms accompanied by profuse vomiting, and great distress. The members of his family were greatly alarmed and Dr. Coon was at once summoned but beyond affording him slight relief, nothing could be done. The terrible spasmodic paroxysms from which he suffered, continued at intervals of perhaps twenty minutes until about 2 o'clock a.m. Monday morning when

> death terminated his sufferings. The disease of which he died was fatty granules of fat within the sarralemma, or walls of the heart, and the substitution of these for the proper muscular tissue...

Would Evelyn Couch be satisfied with this diagnosis?

We learn from the obituary of the late Levi S. Dominy, a well known lawyer, that he

> ...left his office about four o'clock last Saturday afternoon and went home to work a couple of hours in his garden, as was his custom at this season of the year, and he always had a garden to be proud of. He was engaged in making a hotbed near the back side of the garden, when he was stricken, [with apoplexy], shortly after five o'clock. He was not able to call loud enough to attract attention and none of the neighbors near by happened to see him, so he dragged himself as best he could nearly to the kitchen door, when W. H. Vanarman, who keeps his team in the Colonel's barn, went by to take care of the animals, and discovered him. He assisted him into the house and Dr. McFadden was hastily summoned. He rallied a little from the shock, but early in the evening he had another attack, and from that sank gradually until his death...

Today, no doubt, we would know only that Mr. Dominy died after " a short illness", (one of the two known causes of death in the late twentieth century).

The late Miss Clara Bishop was only 22 when she died.

> For years an invalid, [she] had a few days ago a severe hemorrhage [and] began to fail rapidly so that on Saturday evening last she lay in an apparently unconscious state for about five hours. On Sunday morning she rallied and remarked to her friends at her bedside that when they thought her unconscious she was not so, but on the contrary knew what was transpiring around her; and besides she was favored with a beatific vision of somewhat of the other world. Not many months ago her sister Lizzie preceded her to the other life, and it was she whom [Miss Bishop] saw waiting with outstretched arms to welcome her to the heavenly abode. This vision inspired her with reluctance to return, but she submitted with patience. She had not long to wait, however, for she bid adieu to earth and its scenes on Monday morning last with perfect resignation.

Obviously, this is an account of a 19th century Near Death Experience.

The late Mrs. A. R. Manning died at 8 o'clock one Sunday morning:

> On Friday, the 11th she gave birth to a daughter and was getting along well, as her attendants and friends supposed, although for the past few days she had suffered a good deal from neuralgic pain her head, but no special alarm on the part of her attentive husband and nurse was felt till last Saturday night, or rather about 4 o'clock Sunday morning, when unfavorable symptoms appeared which excited their great concern, and her physician and a few of her most intimate friends were summoned to her bedside, but all efforts for her relief were fruitless, and apparently unconscious of suffering, she yielded up her life.

If obituary writers found no problem creating dramas out of quiet, home-deaths, they had field days with fatal accidents and suicides, as we can see in the following obituary about the late Mrs. Hodges' tragic accident:

> At a little before one o'clock [in the morning], a party [of eight or ten people who had been at Mr. and Mrs. Platt Harris' wedding anniversary] took leave of their host and hostess. In the earlier part of the night, when they assembled, no need of lanterns had

> been experienced, and very few were provided. Now, all was changed. The sky was overcast, rain was falling, and the blackness of darkness was all over. The party groped their way in the darkness toward the village until the sound announced to them that they had approached and were entering upon the bridge. One must needs be placed in like circumstances to realize the sensation of terror creeping over one groping his way in the pitchy darkness over an abyss of roaring, rushing water. Fearful of mis-steps and mishaps, the party moved slowly, not knowing whether they were at the right or left or middle of the bridge.

To make a very long story shorter, a horse and wagon also drove onto the bridge in the dark, colliding with the party on foot. The horse spooked and backed the wagon into the railing of the bridge, the railing broke, the wagon rolled into the river, pulling the horse and the pedestrians on the bridge. To continue the account,

> Mr. Hodges, Mrs. Tyler and Mrs. Atwood struck upon the pen-stock, only a few feet below the bridge, and were uninjured. Mrs. Hodges and Mrs. Howard were precipitated into and carried down by the rushing water. The distance from the bridge to the water has been found to be sixteen feet, and the river bed at

> this point is covered with immense rocks. Mr. Hodges...having snatched a lantern from someone passing in the street, rushed down the river bank, and was the first to reach the sufferers. In such time as seemed endless to the lookers on, but was in reality as soon as possible, other lanterns glimmered in the darkness, and other hands came to the rescue. Mrs. Hodges was a person of sensitive organism and very delicate health. In a perfectly helpless condition she was carried up the bank and borne back to the residence of Mr. Harris. Dr. Housinger was in almost immediate attendance, and, after examination, reported two ribs broken and a sprained wrist, injuries which it was judged would not be followed by fatal results...But...in the early hours of the Sabbath morning, when the friends of Mrs. Hodges were quietly resting in the assurance that all was well, the frail body, which only held her with a feeble grasp at best, let go its hold, and when the hands which waited in loving ministration on her wants sought again their work, they found it tenantless.

Another obituary describes how the late Miss Mattie Ayers committed suicide one morning,

> ...by throwing herself into the Saranac River at Moffitsville, at the High Falls...For some months past

it has been apparent that she was insane of a melancholy type with religious hallucinations. It was further shown that she informed the family this morning that she intended to call at Mr. True's whose house is situated about midway between her father's house and the falls. It was unusual for her to leave the house alone and she accordingly watched, and as soon as she passed by the place where she said she was to stop she was pursued by her brother and Mr. H.A. Wood, who were watching her, and who ran a horse at full speed, being then satisfied of her object. They drove as far as the road allowed, then abandoned the wagon and ran in hot pursuit across the pasture land. They occasionally got sight of her---now she entered a clump of bushes, now turned the corner of a high rock, [entering] a deep ravine. It was indeed a race for life. At last she reached the high bank beneath which runs the maddened current, and for a moment paused, just as Mr. Ayers who was foremost in the pursuit came again in sight of her and at a glance took in the distressing situation, and with a pleading cry to her, "Don't! Don't!" and whole within two arms lengths of him, she calmly fell back into the boiling, writhing current below, and was dashed by its giant hands against the ragged rocks. She was rescued by Mr. Wood who hastened below and waded out into the current after her. She was in the water

> but five minutes and while he was bringing her to shore she gave a few faint gasps and died.

Scandals and misbehavior were also included in the obituaries, as we can see in the following account of how the late Henry F. Marcy died of apoplexy on his bathroom floor:

> He had been greatly worried of late over matters in connection with the [railroad company of which he was president]. An exhaustive examination of the accounts has been in progress for several weeks and during the last few days rumors of changes to be made in the management have been heard widely. Yesterday it developed that a shortage of $12,000 to $15,000 had been found by the experts at work and these facts, it is stated by friends, brought on the fatal stroke.

The late Herbert L. Marsh, whose body was found face downward on a sandbar at the mouth of the Saranac River, had been told by his business partner

> ...that the partnership would have to be dissolved and that [Marsh] would have to make good the shortage on the books of the firm...a large deficiency. To this Mr. Marsh said nothing but went to his home for supper. While there, he changed his clothing, leaving his

watch, rings and scarf pin. During the evening, he went into the American House, on River street, in a state of intoxication.

So much for speaking ill of the dead. Every small town enjoys a scandal or at least something gossip-worthy, but the people of this community put the dirt right into the obituaries. There were no secrets in this small community, so why not just unveil them once and for all as a parting gesture? For example, it is interesting to learn that the late Thomas Armstrong, who was found dead in his room over A. McHattie's store, had earned in his profession as a lawyer, "a bounteous income which was judiciously invested in real estate, which together with its natural increase from rents and the enhancement of its value from year to year soon amounted to and became a large-paying property."

In these obituaries, all people, regardless of how saintly or naughty, received an impressive plug about their unique experiences, important contributions or personal characteristics. For example, the late Mrs. Gerow, we are told, was the granddaughter of a Revolutionary War soldier, and she "cut the first tree in Grand Isle, [Vermont]..." while building a homestead there. She also, "remembered distinctly of hearing the guns of the Battle of Plattsburgh, being then in her eighth year." Later, in her final years, she was "the first <u>inmate</u> of the Vilas Old Ladies Home, entering it at its opening eight years ago." The other "inmates" reported that "she was of a bright, happy disposition and

fond of company, loyal to the Home, of a grateful and appreciative nature, always considerate of those caring for her, and often expressing thanks for their care."

The late Mrs. Cynthia M. Cutler

> passed through great trials [during her life] and bore them with Christian fortitude. The sudden death of her husband when comparatively young was a severe stroke, and left her lonesome and with heavier burdens to bear. After that, not many years elapsed before her son, Frank, an efficient Christian worker, was also taken away suddenly. She mourned and missed him, as did our whole community, but she bore it calmly, feeling that Providence had so ordered it and it must be right.

The late young Earl Parsons, age 18, was a student at Albany Business College, where he was to have finished in five weeks. But he came down with typhoid fever. In the obit, the Principal of the Business College is quoted as saying,

> "Earl was one of our very best students of the present school year, and was highly regarded by his teachers and associate pupils. His interest in his work here was so keen and intense that we are not at all surprised that it should have been in his thoughts during his sickness." It is a cause of sadness to all when a

> young man, full of promise, is called from our midst. It is a "pitcher broken at the fountain."

Why, we may ask, were the obituaries of our great grandparents' day written so differently from the ones of today?

First, these obituaries from the past were no doubt influenced by echoes of the Romantic literary tradition. According to Wilkie and Hurt, "The more one felt, the better; emotion was fine, but ecstacy finer still" (7). Philippe Aries, author of Western Attitudes Towards Death points out,

> ...in the past [prior to the nineteenth century], [death]...was...an event as banal as holiday seasons. People expected it, and when it occurred they followed the rituals laid down by custom. But in the nineteenth century, a new passion stirred those present [at the deathbed]. Emotion shook them, they cried, prayed, gesticulated" [59].

Also, these obituaries, though written by and for a literate society, contained remnants of the oral tradition, which explains the rambling, entertaining, story-telling narrative structure. They frequently state that "word spread from house to house that Mrs. So-and-so had passed away." In addition, for all their individuality, they contain formulaic phrases which show up repeatedly (for example, the death was always "a shock", even when

the dead person had been in failing health for years, and the deceased had always shown "Christian fortitude" while dying.) Another carryover from the oral tradition was the sketching of each departed person's reputation, whether good or bad. In fact, the small town folks of the mid to late nineteenth century were what Ong would classify as a residually oral culture. This community was technically an "alphabetic" society---in the second of Ong's three stages of communication---but Ong points out:

> It must not be thought....that, because the eighteenth century was a significant watershed dividing residually oral culture from typographical culture, it thereby eliminated all oral residue from Western society. In many cases, oralism persisted much later and with great force [69].

By the early twentieth century, according to Aries, attitudes toward death had begun to change radically. He writes:

> The procedure of hushing-up had begun. For it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so...[the previous attitude towards death] was covered over by a different sentiment, a new sentiment characteristic of modernity---one must avoid...the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and

> by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life...[86, 87].

Thus, we can see that the rhetoric of death has changed over the past century in response to widespread technological and socio-cultural revolutions that have overturned the simpler lifestyles of one hundred years ago. The old obituaries tell stories of the times as well as the people, and the portrait which emerges from these hundreds of tales is of a life which seemed, from the perspective of the twentieth century, shorter, harder, and more vulnerable.

Now-extinct diseases are cited frequently as the cause of death: consumption , typhoid, scarlet fever and diptheria. "Heart disease", along with apoplexy, was used to explain just about every other sudden departure because in those days, they did not have the equipment or the specialized medical knowledge to diagnose human ailments as early and precisely as we can now. Of course, accidents and old age never go out of style, but the accidents cited in the old obituaries were frequently caused by horses and buggies or farming equipment and "old" was defined as being 60 or over---one 71-year-old man was referred to as "our aged brother in Christ"). Many a young person was described as having been "an invalid for years" before his or her untimely death. Women died in childbirth. Families usually had many children, of whom at least a few had always seemed to have died during infancy or childhood. Men were widowed and remarried, women were widowed and usually remained

widows. Most older folks lived in the homes of their adult children until their deaths.

But in just three or four generations, this pre-technological lifestyle has died out, and with it, a style of obituary which celebrated the lives of people, portraying them as interesting, unique and fallible human beings. How ironic that the modern obituary, the write-up of the most profound of human milestones, has been stripped of all human interest.

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